

# The Herald-Sun

## REVIEW: Shen Wei opens ADF with rich offering

Jun. 12, 2015 @ 06:03 PM

By SUSAN BROILI, Special to The Herald-Sun

DURHAM —

The opening night of the American Dance Festival's 82nd season Thursday at the Durham Performing Arts Center proved a rich offering indeed.

It began with a ceremony dedicating the season to Charles "Chuck" Davis, founder of the Durham-based African American Dance Ensemble and long-time ambassador of "peace, love, respect — for everybody."

ADF director Jodee Nimerichter ended her remarks with "Peace, love, respect — to you," turning to look at Davis resplendent in a red, African-style "robe" that sparkled with sequins.

Davis really didn't need those sequins to shine for no one lights up a room or even a large theater like DPAC like Davis with his powerful presence, kind-heartedness and warm smile.

"He brings the joy of dance, the excitement of rhythm and the intensity of humanity to everything he does," Nimerichter said. After the remarks, Davis led the audience in his African call-and-response: "Ago — Amay" and his company performed some inspired dancing and drumming.

In the ADF-commissioned world premiere of Shen Wei's "UNTITLED NO. 12-2," the artist's two passions — painting and dance-making — coalesced.

Other work — the 2004 "Connect Transfer" and 2012 "undivided Divided," a site-specific work at the N.C. Museum of Art, — had featured the use of paint and dancers' movements.

In the new work, dancers didn't need any paint. In Shen's choreography, they "painted" the space with their bodies' movements thus creating the 12th work of art in Shen's series.

The other 11 were the large, black, white and gray abstract paintings featured in Shen's exhibition at Miami Dade College Museum of Art and Design.

As a prelude to the new dance, images of those paintings were projected on a movie screen-sized backdrop. The paintings evoked Chinese landscape paintings except that the brushstrokes were bolder, freer. Shen's paintings also left room for contemplation in the way afforded by natural landscapes. The white areas especially offered viewers a place to feel centered and at peace. At the same time, the color communicated the beauty of a snowy mountain scene.

Several times during the dance, projected images of paintings appeared on dancers' bodies, subtly suggesting the merging of image and movement-making and so did dancers' costumes in either all-black, gray or white. Mostly, Shen Wei Dance Arts dancers, to Chou Wen-Chung's music, "Echoes from the Gorge," created a constantly shifting landscape with a dynamic flow just like Shen's brush strokes. Sometimes, they walked slowly in a meditative way, their arms relaxed at their sides. Their energy

seemed to come from a quiet center as they focused on their breath and an awareness of their bodies. Perhaps this focus enabled them to make the demanding choreography look effortless.

In the restaged “Map,” to excerpts from Steve Reich’s “The Desert Music,” dancers amped up their mission-impossible prowess as they executed Shen’s movement explorations in this dynamic work. The five huge, helium-filled balloons hovered near the ceiling above DPAC’s orchestra pit and added to the atmosphere of a grand, whirl-wind adventure.

On the balloons, Shen had hand-pointed his “maps” — notations for the dance that included arrows and other markings.

The dance began as dancers, on the stage floor, rotated their bodies in corkscrew turns exhibiting amazing flexibility as though their joints were on ball bearings. In a new movement territory, dancers became so buoyant and bouncy they resembled tethered balloon people on a windy day.

At other times, dancers tested gravity’s pull on an edge between balancing and falling. A male dancer thrust one leg so far in front of him that he had to lean way back as a counterweight to keep from crashing. He remained “suspended” for longer than seemed possible.

To one of the fast movements of Reich’s music, dancers pulled off the impossible at warp speed. In a repeated sequence, they dropped, rolled, rose on hands and feet and transitioned to being upright again. After trying to figure out just how they accomplished this feat, I just allowed myself to be mesmerized by it. And, really, the entire work proved hypnotic and left me marveling at these dancers and Shen’s creative, exploring spirit.

GO & DO

WHAT: The American Dance Festival presents Shen Wei Dance Arts.

WHEN: 7 p.m. today.

WHERE: Durham Performing Arts Center.

TICKETS: 919-680-2787 or [www.americandancefestival.org](http://www.americandancefestival.org)